

3rd Sunday of Advent

Last Saturday at 1 o'clock, this cathedral joined cathedrals around the world and pealed our bells. At that very moment the archbishop of Paris heard bells ringing from the towers over his head, and then he reopened the doors of his cathedral, Notre Dame. The fire that gutted its rafters five years ago horrified people around the world. A building that welcomed visitors since the twelfth century was closed for extensive repairs in the twenty-first century. This generation of Parisians could have been mortified that they witnessed the destruction of their beloved, historic landmark, but instead they provided the workers and skills to restore the building's glory. The fire revealed to many people around the world how dear Notre Dame is to them. It's more than a building; it's a presence. For believers, any house of worship represents the presence of God in the midst of the world from one generation to the next. Nonbelievers must have questioned why they felt so affected by that fire.

It sometimes takes a loss before we realize how important something is to us. I occasionally drive by my childhood home a few miles from here. Even though our family moved away decades ago, that building still retains a certain mystique for me. When a friend of mine took ill last year, the prospect of going on without him revealed how much he meant to me. It's better to realize the importance of a friend without discovering it when things go wrong.

In response to today's first reading, we sang verses from the prophet Isaiah. Usually we sing from one of the psalms, but occasionally the lectionary gives us words that looks like a psalm but appear elsewhere in the bible. The Church invites us to sing this particular canticle on different occasions. Those who pray the Liturgy of the Hours say them on Thursday morning of the second week of the cycle. At the Easter Vigil these same verses serve as the responsorial for the fifth reading, though with a different refrain: "You will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation"—to prepare for the baptisms of that Mass. But today, the Third Sunday of Advent of Year C, we use the same canticle with this refrain: "Cry out with joy and gladness: for among you is the great and Holy One of Israel." In these days before we celebrate the birth of Christ, we can imagine his mother singing these words to the people around her before the arrival of her Son: "Be glad, the great and Holy One of Israel is among you. He is in your midst." Indeed, he was in her womb.

Like the cathedral of Notre Dame, other historical monuments around the world declare that the great and Holy One of Israel is among us. But we also discern God's presence in simpler structures that carry meaning to us, colorful sunsets, and certain people who bear witness to God's love.

On this Gaudete Sunday, the Church invites us to rejoice that our celebration of the nativity of Christ is near. But it also invites us to help others rejoice. Sometimes we walk into a room fired up to criticize and complain. But we could walk into a room with a different purpose: to share joy, to build up, to reassure. This Christmas, blessed are we when people rejoice to see us, like visitors to the interior of Notre Dame. Because of the message we bring, others will cry out with joy and gladness for they can tell in our words and deeds that within us and among them is the great and Holy One of Israel.